



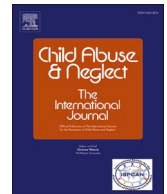
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Two years into COVID-19: What do we know so far about child maltreatment in times of a pandemic and what else should be explored?

It has been almost two years since the initial outbreak of COVID-19, which disrupted the lives of all people around the world. During this time a group of child abuse and neglect researchers worked to document, understand, uncover and ameliorate the adverse impacts of COVID-19 specifically for children and youth. Although the pandemic has lasted nearly two years, research is still in its initial stages as we are only beginning to understand the true consequences for children, families, communities, and practitioners worldwide. This third and final issue of the International Journal of *Child Abuse & Neglect* is dedicated to COVID-19 as we continue to explore our existing knowledge in order to contribute.

The first manuscript presents an international study by [Katz et al. \(2022\)](#), and examines child maltreatment (CM) reports and child protective service (CPS) responses one year into the pandemic in 12 regions: Australia (New South Wales), Brazil, United States (California, Pennsylvania), Colombia, England, Germany, Israel, Japan, Canada (Ontario, Quebec), and South Africa. The results clearly illustrate the broad and varied impacts of COVID-19 on these regions. All regions reported experienced CPS disruptions due to the pandemic. The authors stress that social, economic, and structural contexts impacted both CM reports and CPS responses and that these drivers must be considered when assessing the health of children and their families as well as designing interventions.

Other researchers in several jurisdictions around the globe found that CM reports were affected by COVID-19, such as Bridgend, UK ([Rengasamy et al., 2022](#)), North Carolina ([Machlin et al., 2022](#)), France ([Massiot et al., 2022](#)), and Korea ([Kim, 2022](#)). These studies pinpoint the enormous impact of lockdowns on systems' ability to function, the worrisome increase of all risk factors for children combined with the resulting tremendous decrease in reports of CM has likely resulted in children who have not received the help of protection they need.

The study from France ([Massiot et al., 2022](#)) examines the reports made to child advocacy centers during the first lockdown. The authors highlight a decrease in both referrals to the centers and judicial activity (i.e., forensic examinations and child forensic interview recordings). However, assessment consultations increased, and the cases receiving these assessments were more documented as more severe than cases in pre COVID assessments. The authors conclude that the increase in the severity of abuse referrals to the centers during the lockdown and the following three months requires urgent screening, care and support children during a pandemic.

The study by [Machlin et al. \(2022\)](#) was conducted in North Carolina among 120 families with children ages 4–11 and a primary caregiver. The participants were recruited based on surveys completed prior to the pandemic which indicated a high risk of family violence exposure. The caregivers then completed weekly surveys during the pandemic to assess family violence, caregiver employment status, and caregiver emotional reactivity. The results clearly demonstrate that high levels of family violence occurred following the stay-at-home orders, especially in families with higher baseline violence, higher caregiver emotional reactivity, and caregiver unemployment or underemployment. These associations suggest that vulnerable families may respond to the additional stressor of stay-at-home orders with increased violence and, thus, need additional support in moments of crisis.

The study from Korea ([Kim, 2022](#)) documents that the average number of hotline calls related to child maltreatment significantly decreased in the early stage of the pandemic. However, after the initial few months, calls to the hotline significantly increased, except for some months that had averages not statistically different from zero. Multivariate analysis found that an increase in the male unemployment rate was significantly associated with an increase in the number of hotline calls.

Finally, child maltreatment reporting trends were examined in Bridgend, Wales, UK ([Rengasamy et al., 2022](#)) and reveal some important findings. The authors documented an increase in self-referrals to local support services for domestic and child abuse

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concerns as well as an increase in referrals from family and friends with child protection concerns. However, a different trend was identified regarding a decrease in referrals from the police, schools, and nurseries. The authors conclude that reduced engagement with public sector organizations during lockdowns requires better adaptations, which should be considered in similar future crises.

Along with the alarming findings reported in these studies, another group of studies illustrate the impact known predictors of CM and poor outcomes for children. A study by [Hails et al. \(2022\)](#) involved 267 parents of children between the ages of 18 months and five year of age. The parents completed questionnaires asked about COVID-19 distress, negative parenting, child behavioral problems, and the moderating role of parent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The results indicate that negative parenting significantly mediated the relationship between COVID-19 distress and the child's emotional and behavioral problems. Parents' ACEs moderated the associations between COVID-19 distress and both negative parenting and child emotional and behavioral problems, such that each relationship was stronger in the context of higher parental ACEs.

In another study ([Gewirtz-Meydan & Lassri, 2022](#)), a profile analysis of COVID-19 stress-related reactions was carried out to explore the implications of early childhood abuse, psychopathology, and interpersonal relationships. Based on a convenience sample of 914 men and women in Israel, the authors conducted a latent profile analysis (LPA) to estimate distinct profiles in individual COVID-19-related distress. Five profiles were identified: the distressed, the worried, the lonely and broke, the caregivers, and the untroubled. Profiles in which individuals had more COVID-19 related distress were characterized by more childhood abuse and psychopathology and less social support and relationship satisfaction. The authors suggest that taking such factors into consideration has the potential to better modify both prevention and intervention efforts in a pandemic.

In a study by [Zafar et al. \(2022\)](#), parenting practices, stressors, and parental concerns during COVID-19 in Pakistan were examined. Their study included 923 parents with at least one child under the age of 18. The authors report several stressful factors for parents during the COVID-19 pandemic – mainly financial burden, children's education, and uncertainty of the situation. The study results also indicate an association of parental concerns during COVID-19 with parenting practices. The authors conclude by emphasizing the urgent need for targeted and accessible interventions for parents' mental health.

[Oliveira et al. \(2022\)](#) conducted a study among parents in Brazil to examine children's behavioral problems, screen time, and sleep problems in association with negative and positive parenting strategies during the COVID-19 outbreak. Three hundred twenty-nine parents responded to questions regarding their parenting strategies and styles, children's behavior, COVID-19, socio-economic information, sleep, and gaming. The authors report that parents' frequent use of negative strategies was a risk factor for adverse outcomes related to their children's mental health, gaming, sleep, and behavior. They conclude that parents could benefit from training regarding their parenting styles and strategies to manage their children better and, more importantly, avoid negative consequences for children in times of stress.

In addition to portraying the various contexts in which elevated risks occur for children, the study by [Fogarty et al. \(2022\)](#) aimed to illuminate the challenges in interventions. Their study explores parents' experiences of participating in a parent-child telehealth intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also examine clinicians' experiences delivering the service, including key strengths and challenges. Parents reported that *Restoring Childhood* delivered via telehealth resulted in improvements in their parenting skills and confidence, parent-child relationships, and children's emotional-behavioral functioning. Both parents and clinicians stressed the creativity utilized during the online approach and the increased accessibility it offered for families. However, clinicians discussed important considerations for telehealth, including safety and confidentiality, technological challenges, and challenges in working from home. This study, along with the accumulating evidence in respect to telehealth interventions, stresses the imperative need to advance the development of evidence-based interventions in this area.

Spotlighting areas in which there is an urgent need for further exploration, [Tso and colleagues \(2022\)](#) provide a rare glance into the mental health and maltreatment risk of children with special educational needs (SEN) during COVID-19. Children with SEN had a significantly poorer quality of life overall and almost one-quarter had at least one episode of severe physical assault. Children with mental health disorders had an increased risk of severe physical assault compared to those without mental health disorders. Using a sample of 417 children with SEN, this study shows that the risk of maltreatment for children with SEN is higher now than in the pre-COVID-19 era. These results emphasize the pressing need for policymakers to carefully consider this group while planning the protection of children during a pandemic.

In a study conducted in Portugal ([Costa et al., 2022](#)), 243 adolescents aged 12 to 18 living in 21 different residential care institutions were asked about their psychological adjustment during COVID-19. The results suggest a moderating role of cohesion on the stability of adolescents' emotional distress across time. Lower levels of cohesion were related to higher emotional distress stability across time. In contrast, as cohesion increased, the association between adolescents' emotional distress decreased. The authors conclude that the mechanisms raised by institutions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic have an imperative role in minimizing the adverse effects on the psychological adjustment of adolescents living in residential care.

Finally, two studies aimed to assess the impact of the pandemic on practitioners. In a study carried out in the U.S. by [Renov et al. \(2022\)](#), they examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child protective service caseworkers and administrators. Thirty-seven participants shared the ways that the pandemic changed their interventions, especially concerning the move to virtual interventions. In addition to this challenging change, the practitioners described the personal barriers they faced during the pandemic and the need to find creative solutions to support children and families. The authors stress the key role of CPS in protecting children during a pandemic and the fundamental importance of preparing and involving these organizations and practitioners in future pandemic policy and planning.

The second study ([Stevenson et al., 2022](#)) focuses on nurses' care for COVID-19 patients in predicting parental burnout and child abuse, while exploring the mediating effects of compassion fatigue. An examination of 244 nurses illustrates how the direct care of COVID-19 patients, exposure to patient death and suffering due to COVID-19, and family income loss due to COVID-19 predicted

greater compassion fatigue. In turn, this predicted greater parental burnout, child abuse, child neglect, spousal conflict, and self-harm. Furthermore, as compassion satisfaction increased, parental burnout, child abuse, child neglect, spousal conflict, and self-harm decreased. These results, along with those reported by Renov et al. (2022), highlight the importance of supporting frontline practitioners while stressing COVID-19's significant impact both in their workplace and their homes as parents.

The knowledge generated by the researchers in the studies contained in this volume represents an important contribution to the literature. There is however the need for additional research that will document the extent of COVID-19 on children and their families. This will also help to ensure that in any future pandemic, or other international crises, all children will be protected. We would like to conclude by expressing our appreciation for our amazing community of scholars who dedicate their careers to advancing children's security and lives without violence around the globe. We are especially thrilled by the impressive number of countries that developed the cutting-edge knowledge published in our three-volume series on child maltreatment in times of COVID-19. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to ISPCAN for their outstanding support at all times, but especially for their tremendous impact on our society and the millions of children around the world during the pandemic. Finally, we would like to express our profound appreciation to Professor Christine Wekerle, the editor-in-chief of *Child Abuse & Neglect*, for her trust, support, and leadership in our field.

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